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Promotion and Non-Promotion in the Elementary School

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PROMOTION AND NON-PROMOTION IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

by

FRANK CAROTHERS

A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master
of Education in the Graduate
School of the Central
Washington College
of Education

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The following paper is approved as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Education in the Graduate School of Central Washington College of Education.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

"There is probably no single aspect of the organization of graded elementary schools which continuously confronts teachers and administrative officers in a more baffling manner than that of promotions."¹ This statement has been verified by the writer's experience innumerable times and this study was undertaken with the hope of finding some of the answers to the questions that continually come up regarding promotion and non-promotion. Almost everyone who discusses promotion, whether he be teacher, parent, or administrator, has a different idea of the amount of, the evils of, the reasons for, the values of, and cures for non-promotion. It is the desire of the author to find facts as determined by research concerning this problem and to learn principles of a good promotional policy.

It is true that the number of pupils who fail to pass into the next grade, has decreased in the past few years, but the failure of only one student can create problems and worries for the school staff all out of proportion to the percentage he represents of the class. The problem is

¹ Henry J. Otto, Elementary School Organization and Administration (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1932), p. 198

intensified by the fact that it is usually faced near the end of the school term when the staff is busy with all of the work that goes with the closing of school. The matter of non-promotion is usually put off until the last moment in the hope that something will occur that will render the problem less acute. Consequently it is necessary to make a decision; there is not enough time to give thorough consideration to all of the facts and frequently the question arises of whether or not the proper action was taken.

The effect that failure or promotion will have on the individual pupil also complicates the problem. Is he going to feel more secure with the younger pupils if he repeats the grade, or will he miss the friends he has made in previous grades? Will he accept the fact that his work has not been up to standard and endeavor to do better, or will his attitude be that he has not had a fair deal or that school work is just too difficult for him and he might as well stop trying?

The effect that the promotion policy has on the school and on teachers must be considered. Are the desired results of pupil failure worth the disadvantages that come with having older students in with the younger ones and the added cost that an extra year of schooling will entail? If the student has failed, will the teacher who is to have him in her room arrange his program of studies to take care of his

deficiencies and give him new challenging work through which he can succeed, or will the student receive the old standard treatment that did not take the first time that it was administered? If he is promoted when his teacher knows, he knows, and his new teacher knows that he has not met the standards for the grade, will the new teacher accept this fact and make an effort to meet his needs and provide material that he can handle and which will help him grow, or will she take the attitude that he is just another "dumb bunny" and the previous teachers just did not teach him anything?

The effect that pupil failure has on parents and the general public is another point for consideration. Parents must understand the action being taken and favor it. When parents are not in agreement with the school, a rift is built up between the school and the parent, with the student in the middle. The promotion policy can be a possible source of poor public relations. If the failure of a student is not understood by the student and his parents, the school is frequently criticized in the community; friends are lost and enemies are made. Then, too, if the public does not understand the policy there are frequent criticisms no matter what the policy is. There are those who criticize if a number of pupils are not promoted, and there are those who criticize when most of the pupils are promoted. We have all heard the remark, "The schools just aren't like they used to

be, no one learns anything and everyone passes," or, "They've got kids in the seventh grade who can't read any better than second graders, and they just keep passing them along." This attitude on the part of the public complicates the problem of promotion and makes it necessary that any policy be well formulated, well publicized, and based on the facts as determined by research.

It is with these questions and complications in mind and a need to have the facts and figures from research to present to teachers, parents, students, and the public, that this paper was prepared.

CHAPTER II

AN ANALYSIS OF "THE GRADE STANDARDS THEORY" OF PROMOTION

Development of the graded school. In the earliest schools in our country the problem of promotion did not exist because all of the pupils were assembled in one room and the curriculum consisted of reading, writing, and a little arithmetic. All of the students had the same curriculum and there was no progression to another grade or school. However, soon the classes became too large for one room and one teacher, and a division was made necessary.¹ The graded school was the natural result of these divisions. In 1818 the Boston schools separated the younger children, ages four to seven, into a dame school, with the older students grouped into a grammar school. For the purpose of segregation it was designated that "No youth shall be sent to the Grammar Schools, unless they shall have learned in some other school, or in some other way, to read the English language by spelling the same."² What constituted reading is implied by the statement:

¹E.P. Cubberley, History of Education (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1920), pp. 756-57.

²Adolph A. Sandin, Social and Emotional Adjustments of Regularly Promoted and Non-Promoted Pupils (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1944), p. 5.

That the pupils in each of the schools shall be arranged into four classes, viz: Those who read in the Testament shall be in the First Class; those in easy reading, in the Second Class; those who spell in two or more syllables, in the Third Class; those learning their letters and monosyllables, in the Fourth Class; and that the books be the same in every school, for each pupil thereafter entering.³

This was the first differentiated curriculum, and promotion from one to the other was based on clearly defined standards. The graded school developed rapidly from this beginning, and by 1860 most cities had established some form of graded system of schools.⁴ Each grade came to signify a level of achievement, and subject matter was parcelled out by grades. This led to what Elsbree calls the "Grade Standard Theory of Pupil Progress".⁵ The underlying principal of this theory was that since each grade had a body of knowledge assigned to it, students should stay in that grade until they mastered that body of knowledge. Tests were set up, and administrative machinery rigidly enforced the standards. Non-promotion was not only frequent but was regarded as punishment and as a cure for all who failed to

³Ibid., p. 6.

⁴E. P. Cubberley, Public Education in the United States (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1934), pp. 307-10.

⁵Willard S. Elsbree, Pupil Progress in the Elementary School (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1943), p. 2.

master the prescribed curriculum.⁶

Surveys of the amount of failure. The high prevailing rate of failures brought about by the adherence to the Grade Standards Theory brought criticism from a number of educators late in the 19th century, and a number of plans for reducing failures were devised. Among the plans were semi-annual promotions, quarterly promotions, private coaching, ability grouping, and special rooms for the unruly or backward. None of these did much to solve the problem, and in 1904 the effect of this theory of promotion was noticed by William H. Maxwell, Superintendent of Schools of New York City, when he called attention to the number of overage pupils in the New York City Schools.⁷ Interest in the problem developed rapidly and in 1909, Leonard P. Ayres published his study, Laggards in Our Schools,⁸ in which he found that the average rate of non-promotion was sixteen per cent.

After Ayres' studies were made in many states, Bachman found in the New York Survey of 1912 the following:
 "(a) The rate of non-promotion was approximately eleven per cent. (b) The rate of non-promotion was significantly

⁶Sandin, op. cit., p. 6.

⁷Hollis L. Caswell, Non-Promotion in the Elementary Schools, Field Studies Number Four (Nashville, Tennessee: George Peabody College for Teachers, 1933), p. 1.

⁸Leonard P. Ayres, Laggards in Our Schools (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1909).

non-promotion was higher for boys than girls."⁹ Berry studied pupil progress in 225 towns and cities in Michigan in 1915-16 and found that the rate of non-promotion was nine and fourteen hundredths per cent. Caswell studied thirty-seven cities in 1930 to 1932 and found the rate to vary between two and three tenths and sixteen and seven tenths per cent.¹⁰ Other studies show about the same percentages with a great deal of variation from city to city and between schools in the same city.

Stroud¹¹ reports on an interesting study in the Elementary School Journal of February, 1947. He attempted to discover if the impression that there had been a wholesale reduction in the amount of failure was a correct one. He found that there had been some reduction in the rates of failures but not in wholesale lots. He made the point that most studies give the annual rate of non-promotion and that this is important, but it is also important to know the cumulative rate of failure, that is, how many students in a grade, preferably an upper grade, have failed to pass a grade. This average, according to Stroud, is about twenty-five per

⁹Caswell, op. cit., p. 24.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 10 et seq.

¹¹J. B. Stroud, "How Many Pupils are Failed?", Elementary School Journal, 47:316-22, February, 1947.

cent, which means that one out of every four pupils spends an extra year in school. He quotes from Cooke¹² who analyzed school reports for the years between 1908 and 1928 and found that two and one-half million pupils had been failed between the first and eighth grades. Translated into classes of thirty, the time and expense would be appalling.

In the State of Washington, Strayer¹³ found evidence of retardation in his survey of education in Washington in 1947. To quote directly from the report:

The general consensus is that the children of Washington are ordinarily promoted from a grade after one year's residence. However, an analysis of the retardation based upon the number of years the pupils are actually in attendance shows more non-promotion than is suspected. It will be observed that 16.14 per cent of first graders, 20.04 per cent of second graders, 21.59 per cent of third graders, and finally, 21.98 per cent of the total school population in the first eight grades, are retarded one year. In other words, they have failed sometime in their career to be promoted. There is an appreciable group of youngsters--4.16 per cent to be exact---who have failed of promotion two or more times in their school careers. Looking at it in another way, one out of 25 are persistent repeaters.¹⁴

Graham,¹⁵ in studying the promotion and non-promotion

¹²Dennis H. Cooke, "A Study of School Surveys with Regard to Age Grade Distribution," Peabody Journal of Education, 8:259-66, March, 1931.

¹³George D. Strayer, director, A Report of a Survey of Public Education in the State of Washington (Olympia, Washington: State Printing Press, 1946), p. 229.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 229.

¹⁵Willis G. Graham, "A Study of Failure and Non-Promotion in the Yakima Elementary Schools," (unpublished Master's Thesis, Central Washington College of Education, Ellensburg, Washington, 1950, p. 59.

records of sixth grade students in the Yakima, Washington school system in 1950, found that twenty-two and four tenths per cent of the sixth grade students had been non-promoted at least once in their school careers. This bears out the findings of Strayer in his report of the state as a whole and shows that retardation and overage in grade are still serious problems in our schools.

Caswell draws the following conclusions from the various studies made on non-promotion:

(a) The rate of non-promotion in different cities and states varies widely. The range probably approximates 2 per cent to 20 per cent.

(b) The average rate of non-promotion for all grades approximates 10 per cent.

(c) There appears to be regional differences in the extent of the use of non-promotion.

(d) Schools in the same systems differ widely in the extent to which they employ non-promotion, the difference in rate being as high as 30 per cent.

(e) The rate of non-promotion is significantly higher in grade one than in the other grades.

(f) The rate of non-promotion is higher for boys than for girls.

(g) In general, the amount of non-promotion has been somewhat lowered during recent years. The major characteristics of the practice, however, as pointed out more than thirty years ago, exist today in numerous schools. As these characteristics indicated an unsolved problem at that time, they suggest the persistence of the problem.¹⁶

¹⁶Caswell, op. cit., pp. 24-25.

The foregoing information is sufficient to emphasize the prevalence of the non-promoted pupil and to generalize that the rates of non-promotion have been substantial. They have been substantial enough to show that the problems associated with promotion are sufficiently widespread to concern many children, teachers, administrators, parents, and others.¹⁷

Reasons given for the non-promotion of pupils. The most common reason given for non-promotion in the elementary school is the failure of students to achieve in academic subjects.¹⁸ However, to understand the reason for the non-promotion it is necessary to go deeper and discover the reasons for the failure to achieve. The studies that have been made to determine the reasons students fail to achieve actually determine why teachers say they fail to achieve which may or may not be the same thing.¹⁹ The result is the same, however; the student spends an extra year in the grade.

Saunders in his book, Promotion or Failure,²⁰ has

¹⁷Sandin, op. cit., p. 11.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁹Henry J. Otto, Elementary School Organization and Administration (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1934), p. 251.

²⁰Carleton M. Saunders, Promotion or Failure (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1941), pp. 24-26.

listed the reasons given by teachers for the failure of pupils to achieve in their classes. It is typical of the many studies that have been made along similar lines. A condensation follows:

1. **Insufficient achievement:** the student has not learned the prescribed facts for his particular grade so he is held another year in the hope that he will correct this.

2. **Inadequate mentality:** he has not the mentality to do the work in his present grade so could not possibly do the work in a higher grade.

3. **Insufficient attendance:** he has the mentality and could have learned the prescribed facts if he had attended school, but he did not, so he will have to spend another year in the grade.

4. **Imperfect health:** he probably had not the energy or possibly his illness caused absence so that he did not complete his work.

5. **Out of school causes:** such as late entrance, ignorance of the English language, domestic trouble, moving about from school to school, or poor home conditions.

6. **Lack of emotional stability:** the student was probably too upset to put his mind on his work.

7. **Inappropriate administrative practices;** strictly the fault of the school.

Evaluations of reasons. In evaluating the above

reasons it was found that in very few cases were they valid reasons for keeping the child in school an extra year or longer. Research does not show that students will achieve more the second year they spend in a grade, but does show that in many cases they actually achieve less. McKinney²¹ showed that fifty-three per cent of the repeaters made no improvement and twelve per cent did poorer work. Mort²² reports that it is not always those who achieved the least who were non-promoted. Returns from a Stanford Achievement Test showed that six of seventeen children not promoted scored above the lowest quarter of the class and the four who scored the lowest on the test were promoted.

The other reasons given were just as invalid. The second reason, inadequate mentality, was not improved by the child repeating the grade. Poor attendance in most cases did not improve but grew worse as the pupil became less interested in school. Repeating the grade does not improve health. Out of school causes may present valid reasons for non-promotion, but they need to be examined carefully. Non-promoting does nothing to add to emotional

²¹B. T. McKinney, "Promotion of Pupils a Problem in Educational Administration," (unpublished Doctor's dissertation, The University of Illinois, Champaign, Illinois, 1928).

²²Paul R. Mort, The Individual Pupil (New York: The American Book Company, 1928), p. 175.

stability but rather increases the maladjustment. The seventh reason given, inappropriate administrative practices, should be corrected, and the pupil should not be made to suffer for practices that are not under his control.

Values of failure. Otto²³ suggests that reasons for failure need not imply values of failure. When pupils are failed because the quality of work is below the accepted standards of the teacher, it is in the hope that repetition of the grade will advance the student so that subsequently he will not be rated deficient. Otto has this to say of the value of non-promotion:

The reader will note that so far the discussion about the values of failure has dealt with the opinions of teachers and administrators and that in practically all cases these opinions have not been verified by research. It will be interesting to examine the results of objective studies in this field. Doubtless the criterion for judgment should be the educational growth and welfare of children. Studies such as the one by McKinney have shown repeatedly that about 75 per cent of potential failures, if promoted to the next higher grade and given a reasonable amount of consideration and individual attention, will not only sustain themselves in the new grade but that more than 50 per cent of them will receive unconditional promotions at the end of the succeeding term. The evidence, although it may be somewhat meager at present and may need further substantiation, suggests that school failure does not have the beneficent values which have been claimed for it, and that appropriate diagnostic and remedial methods which result in a fuller recognition of individual differences may be, not only a more desirable, but a more valuable substitute.²⁴

²³Otto, op. cit., p. 251.

²⁴Otto, loc. cit.

Benefits of failure. Teachers and administrators who fail to promote children do so with the idea that it will help the individual child and will also benefit the school system as a whole. Otto has this to say concerning the benefits of failure:

The exact functions of values of failure in the elementary grades have never been ascertained. In general, teachers and administrators have assumed, perhaps as a result of tradition that non-promotion was an unavoidable evil in school administration. Some educational workers believe firmly that failure should be reduced to a minimum, but they also believe that the threat of failure must be retained to assure maximum application on the part of pupils. Perhaps everyone who bears some responsibility for the failure recorded at the end of each school term believes that certain advantages will accrue for the pupil if he repeats the grade.²⁵

Other authors discuss the benefits of non-promotion to the individual and to the school and a summarization of the various benefits follows.

1. Homogeneity is achieved;²⁶ that is, the individual teacher will have a narrower spread of abilities among her students and hence will have an easier teaching program. Research does not support this contention. One example of research on this topic is the study made by Cook²⁷ in eighteen schools in Minnesota, nine with a high

²⁵Otto, op. cit., pp.247-48.

²⁶Saunders, op. cit., p. 43.

²⁷Walter W. Cook, "Some Effects of the Maintenance of High Standards of Promotion," Elementary School Journal, 41:430-37, February, 1941.

ratio of overage matched against nine with a low ratio of overage. His purpose was to answer these questions: "When minimum grade standards are established and pupils are required to reach certain levels of achievement before being promoted to the next grade, (1) is the range of abilities with which the upper grade teacher has to cope reduced, (2) are the average grade standards maintained at a higher level, and (3) is pupil achievement, relative to ability, higher?"

His findings were that (1) there was no difference in the variability of classes in respect to achievement fields. (2) Schools with a high percentage of overage pupils have lower average intelligence and lower achievement averages.

Van Wageningen²⁸ tells of an elementary principal who tried for twenty years to achieve uniformity in pupil achievement and thought that he had until he gave a standardized reading test and found that there was a spread of five years in reading achievement in the third grade and nine years in the eighth grade.

2. Another benefit attributed to non-promotion is that it disciplines children and parents.²⁹ The premise is that children should be punished for not completing their work or not being able to read or for not achieving as much

²⁸Saunders, op. cit., p. 42.

²⁹Ibid., p. 43.

as the other students. The parents should be disciplined for not seeing that their children learn. All this would also act as an example for other pupils and scare them into studying. Celia Burns Standler answers in this way, "Promotion is not a reward for good behavior or good marks but it is a means of keeping children within their own age groups, where they can best learn their development tasks."³⁰

3. Non-promotion assures mastery of subject matter.³¹

This reason is based on the assumption that the pupil is just as slow and that it may take him two years to achieve as much as other students achieve in one. Here again the research does not bear this out. One very noteworthy example is from Long Beach, California in which the students who were scheduled for non-promotion were divided into two groups without their knowledge and half retained and the other half trial promoted. The conclusions are quoted from Caswell:

1. It seems to be true, in the cases recorded, that, of two equated groups of potential failures, the trial-promotion group shows greater progress during the succeeding term than does the repeating group.

The experiment reveals:

a. Children of normal ability gain more from trial

³⁰Celia Burns Standler, "Promotion or Placement," Elementary School Journal, 48:61-2, January 1946.

³¹Otto, op. cit., p. 249.

promotion than do children of equal ability from repeating a grade.

b. Children of less than average ability gain little more by repeating a grade than they gain by trial promotion.

c. Pupils in Grades IV-VI profit more from a trial promotion plan than do those in Grades II and III.

2. The indications are that we are not justified in requiring a child of normal ability to repeat in Grades IV-VI.

a. The trial group shows greater average gain in educational tests than does the repeat group.

b. On the basis of teachers' marks, the trial group sustains itself with success, with the mode at 3 (on a five-point scale) the average grade.

c. The record of promotion at the close of the term shows 90 per cent of the trial group promoted.

3. The evidence seems to indicate that there is more justification to requiring pupils to repeat in Grades II and III than in Grades IV-VI.³²

4. Standards of achievement are bolstered by high non-promotion rates. Research has demonstrated that there is little if any relationship between the standards of a school and the rate of non-promotion.³³ In fact, evidence shows that the average levels of achievement tend to be higher in the schools in which the non-promotion rates are low. When there are many repeaters in any one grade there are likely to be more overage pupils in that grade and they will drag the class average down as Cook demonstrated in

³²Caswell, op. cit., p. 70.

³³Henry J. Otto, Elementary School Organization and Administration (second edition; New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1941), p. 235.

Minnesota.³⁴

5. Non-promotion is a stimulus to work; the student is to see from his failing to pass that he is going to have to work hard in school and in life if he is to be a success. The argument is that students need to experience failure as well as success in order to adjust to society. But, in order to adjust to failure it is necessary to understand the cause of it, and to see what needs to be done in order to overcome it. It is not usually necessary for a child to repeat a whole year's schooling in order to experience failure; there are many opportunities for failure each day and they can serve as opportunities for the child to learn the results of failure. To quote from Elsbree:

To a child non-promotion is not unlike a devastating adult failure. Separation from one's playmates and associates as a penalty for not achieving a grade standard is a serious matter. What is equally important educationally is the fact that most children do not see the relationship between their daily mistakes and acts of omission and this decision on the part of the school to leave them behind in the school journey; nor do they sense the justice of it, particularly when non-promotion is the result of absence from school. Therefore, they seldom profit from it. Thus when examined from the angle of the pupil, non-promotion has but little to commend it.³⁵

Effects of a policy of non-promotion. Since a certain number of failures have been the practice in most schools,

³⁴Cook, op. cit., pp. 430-37.

³⁵Elsbree, op. cit., pp. 18-20.

it is important to know just what effect these failures have had on the schools. One result is that a pileup of overage students results in the upper grades as Graham has shown in the Yakima system³⁶ and Strayer found in the state of Washington as a whole.³⁷ Cook has shown that the presence of overage students reduces the average achievement level of the grade and school.³⁸ Thus, one possible effect of a non-promotion policy is the lowering of achievement standards.

Non-promoted overage students are frequently disciplinary problems. Farley, Frey, and Garland found that failure is a leading cause of truancy.³⁹ Caswell writes:

Stryker, a psychologist in the New Jersey State Department of Institutions and Agencies, reports another case of delinquency, that of a normal boy of twelve committed to the reform school for truancy. School dissatisfaction, due to the loss of interest, as a result of demotion and consequent under-grading, was the significant factor in this boy's truancy. By the use of double promotion and the promise of early parole the boy was motivated into doing excellent work. His entire attitude toward school and society was changed. Pride in achievement, success replacing failure, gave this boy a different outlook on life.⁴⁰

³⁶Graham, op. cit., p.

³⁷Strayer, op. cit., p. 229.

³⁸Cook, op. cit., pp. 430-37.

³⁹Eugene S. Farley, Albin J. Frey, and Gertrude Garland, "Factors Related to the Grade Progress of Pupils," Elementary School Journal, 34:186-93, November, 1933.

⁴⁰Caswell, op. cit., p. 79.

Ruth Cunningham mentions the problem created by the attraction the overage retarded boys have for the upper grade girls who mature sooner than the boys of their own age and mentality.⁴¹

Of greater importance than the effect non-promotion has on the school is the effect that non-promotion has on the individual who is retained. If any policy is educationally sound it should benefit the pupils it affects. Evidence has already been presented that pupils do not do better when they repeat a grade but in many cases do worse. Buckingham found in Decatur, Illinois that students who were trial promoted gained much more scholastically than did those who were failed.⁴² This bears out the findings in Long Beach which were mentioned earlier in this paper.

The effect failure to pass a grade has on the personality of the child is probably the effect that we should examine most closely, for that will have the most permanent effect on the life of the child. If there are no serious personality problems created by non-promotion and there appear to be other advantages, then perhaps the non-

⁴¹Ruth Cunningham, and others, Understanding Group Behavior of Boys and Girls (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1951), p. 441.

⁴²B. R. Buckingham, "An Experiment in Promotion," Journal of Educational Research, 129:326-35, May 1921.

promotion is defensible. Caswell states that the effects of non-promotion on personality traits has to be judged largely on the basis of observation by competent students and on evidence from case studies of problem pupils.⁴³ He says that such observation shows that failure often leads to depression and discouragement and a distrust of ability and expectation of further failure. Very often the failing student sees very little relationship between his daily school work and his failure and frequently develops an emotional state that induces a tendency to cease to strive for success. Often the individual tends to rationalize his failure and to build defense mechanisms to explain the situation. The case of the braggart who affirms that he does not care whether he passes his school work is familiar to everyone. Another means of escape is employed by the listless, daydreaming student who escapes the reality of actual failure by success in his daydreams. Truancy and disobedience are similarly employed as defense against failure.

Peters, a teacher and principal in Downing School, Cleveland, Ohio, expresses the results of failure as follows:

And what of the child? Humiliated, discouraged, bewildered, or worse still, callously indifferent, he listlessly attacks the same old problems which have just caused his downfall. Usually he must unlearn before he

⁴³Caswell, op. cit., pp. 77-78.

can relearn. Lacking proper habits of study and not knowing what part of his . . . information is true and what false, he plods or loafs on, without inspiration or hope of success. He lags behind the present class just as he lagged behind the class of last semester, conscious of being outstripped by his juniors, and reacts to the situation with sullenness, indifference, rebellion, or heartache, according to his temperament.⁴⁴

Sandin, when writing on this subject quoted Meek's summary as follows:

A study of the performance of the failure in Boise has convinced the entire force that the repeater is generally a quitter and does about as poor work in his second attempt as in his first trial at the work of a given grade. . . . The parents as well as the child feel injured, so that the teacher must combat both the antagonism of the home and the hostility of the pupil, who has been trained for failure and not for success, and who becomes either morbidly sensitive or brazenly indifferent.⁴⁵

Sandin made a study of social and emotional adjustments of non-promoted children in the Wallingford, Connecticut schools. He used sociometric methods to ascertain the social and emotional adjustments of the non-promoted pupils. He asked all students three questions, the first of which was, "Aside from someone in your family, whom do you like to be with?" From the answers it was possible to determine the extent to which a student chose to be with others from below his grade level, from his own grade, or from a grade above his.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 80.

⁴⁵Sandin, op. cit., pp. 58-60.

The second question was, "If you had the chance to choose the boy or girl you would like to sit beside, whom would you choose?" This question was designed to find out the extent to which each pupil was sought after or rejected by his classmates.

The third question, "If you could study your lessons with some other boy or girl during a period near the end of the school day, with whom would you really like to study?" These answers permitted analysis to determine the child's academic status.

Since all of the children were asked the same questions it permitted a comparison between the promoted and non-promoted pupils. The answers suggested that the slow progress children were more often restricted from associating during school hours with companions who had similar interests. The retarded students choices of friends were usually in grades with students of about their own ages. The regularly promoted students tended to reject the non-promoted students in their choices, also.

Sandin also interviewed the non-promoted students to find out their attitudes toward their classmates and toward school. Most of them showed no resentment against their younger classmates but many felt that they were too young and "babyish" and that they would have been happier in a higher grade. In general their attitude toward school was

not commendable. Approximately forty per cent wished to quit school as soon as they could, and about the same percentage indicated that they disliked school and school work. A majority of the pupils reported that they had not heard others make fun of them when they had failed to pass, rather they were given sympathy from other students which may have been just as bad for them as ridicule.⁴⁶

Sandin summarizes the behavior characteristics of the non-promoted students as follows:

Teacher regarded girls who had repeated grades as reliably more unsportsmanlike, suspicious and distrustful, sensitive and easily hurt, emotionally unstable, and suggestible and easily led than regular-progress girls. They were also regarded as more inclined to daydream, to be inattentive, to be talkative and to interrupt during recitations, and to be easily discouraged in their academic work. Further, the slow-progress girls were judged as reliably more prone to show a dislike for school and school activities.

When the ratings received by regularly promoted boys were compared with those received by boys who had been retained during their school careers, the latter were rated more unfavorably on 18 of the 20 behavior items and reliable differences were found between the groups on 9 items. The slow-progress boys as a group were decidedly less sociable and friendly and less agreeable and pleasant. They were judged as disliking school and as likely to be uncooperative, impertinent, and defiant. Further, teachers indicated that they were inclined to be cruel and bullying to classmates.

In the main, teachers rated the slow-progress groups of children less favorably than all regular-progress pupils on 17 of the 20 behavior traits. . . . Boys in general were rated less favorably than girls. Further,

⁴⁶Ibid., pp. 122-23.

teachers judged 25 per cent of 132 slow-progress pupils as behavior problem cases as against approximately 5 per cent of 175 regular-progress children.⁴⁷

On the other side of the question are the results of a study made by Anfinson and reported in the Elementary School Journal of March, 1941.⁴⁸ He attempted to discover whether the trend toward reduction in the rate of non-promotion because of the popular belief that non-promotion is harmful to the personality development of the child was based on fact. In his study he matched pairs of students in the Junior High Schools of Minneapolis. Before he matched them he gave all students intelligence tests, achievement tests, and sociometric tests. Then he matched a promoted student with a non-promoted student who equaled him in intelligence and on a socio-economic rating. He matched 116 such pairs and then tested them on their adjustment to school. He found that there was no significant difference except that those who were repeaters were emotionally disturbed immediately after their failure. They recovered, however, and in their later school life were as well adjusted as students of the same socio-economic class and who had about the same intelligence as they did. It

⁴⁷Sandin, op. cit., p. 96.

⁴⁸Rudolph Anfinson, "School Progress and Pupil Adjustment," Elementary School Journal, 41:507-14, March, 1941.

was pointed out that the rate of non-promotion was low in Minneapolis, 2.4 per cent, and that the administration might conclude that their promotion policy was a good one with those who might suffer personality troubles being promoted and those who would profit from repeating being failed.

CHAPTER III

RECENT PRACTICES IN PUPIL PROGRESS

Opposed to the grade standard theory of pupil progress discussed in the previous chapter are those who believe that the function of the elementary school is to take pupils at the age of six, and for six years to offer them the educational program that is best suited to their needs.¹ When they have gained all they can from the elementary school they will be promoted to the junior high school, where they will remain for three years and then be promoted to the senior high school. This theory implies continuous progress for all normal pupils but does not necessarily mean that one hundred per cent of the children will be promoted at the end of the year. It means, rather, that not all children are the same when they enter the first grade, and that they are not all going to be able to clear the same hurdles and be alike after six years of schooling. It implies that all children are capable of growth and progress through school should be regulated by the individual's growth and not by his standing in class as compared by achievement marks. There are many plans

¹Willard S. Elsbree, Pupil Progress in the Elementary School (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia, University, 1943), pp. 24-25.

for making continuous progress possible and several will be discussed in this chapter.

Methods of changing policy. There are two ways that a school may change from the old traditional to the newer practices. One is for the superintendent to announce, possibly with newspaper headlines, that all non-promotion is to be abolished and henceforth all pupils will be promoted regardless of the type of work being done in the classroom. It is not difficult to imagine the effects such a procedure would have on the teachers who have relied on non-promotion to solve their classification problems and who believe in the old theory. It is not hard to imagine the effect on public relations, either. This would mean only the substitution of no policy for the old one and would not solve the problem.²

A second and better method is the preparation of a statement of promotion policies by the members of the faculty and parent representatives, oriented to the purpose of education prevailing in the school.

The formulation of such a policy of promotion will be welcomed by parents and teachers alike. Individual teachers, particularly, welcome the guidance they can get

²Henry J. Otto, Elementary School Organization and Administration (second edition; New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1941), p. 237.

from definite policies.³ Steps in the formulation of a policy as stated by Caswell are: 1. Determining the status of pupil progress. Find out what policies are being used and determine their effectiveness in meeting the needs of the school and the pupils. 2. Study theories of pupil progress. 3. Formulate policies that are to be used by all the teachers in a particular school. An example of policies stated by one group of teachers follows:

1. A pupil whose chronological age is below the standard age for the grade and whose mental age and educational age is one-half year or more above the grade standard should be provided with an enriched curriculum in the grade to which he would be regularly promoted.

2. A pupil whose chronological age is not more than one half year below the standard age for the grade and whose mental age and educational age are one and one-half or two years above the grade standard should be accelerated one-half year.

3. Pupils thirteen and one-half years or more of age who are in the sixth grade should be advanced to the Junior High School. Children in the lower grades who are thirteen years or over, and who have repeated without achieving higher standards, should be advanced to Junior High School.

4. Over-age pupils whose mental age and educational age are one year below standard for the grade, should be advanced normally with definite provisions for their lack.

5. A pupil should be promoted to a higher grade without normal achievement of the preceding grade, and opportunities should be provided that are fitted to his abilities and needs (a) in the opportunity room, (b) by

³Caswell, op. cit., pp. 84-89.

grouping in a special class, (c) by regrouping within a class, or (d) by differentiation of the course of study.⁴

Guideposts in forming policies. Another set of guideposts to be used in formulating a policy of pupil progress is the one drawn up by the committee that prepared the Ninth Yearbook of the Department of Superintendence.⁵ A brief outline of the six general principles is stated by Otto:

A. Promotion should be decided on the basis of the individual pupil.

B. Promotion should be on the basis of many factors. The final decision as to whether a particular pupil should be promoted should rest not merely on accomplishment, but on what will result in the greatest good to the all-around development of the individual.

C. In order that promotion procedures may be more or less uniform throughout a particular school system, a definite set of factors should be agreed upon, which each teacher will take into consideration in forming his judgment as to whether or not a particular pupil should be promoted.

D. Criteria for promotion must take into consideration the curriculum offerings of the next higher grade or unit and the flexibility of its organization, its courses of study, and its methods.

E. It is the duty of the next higher grade or unit to accept pupils who are properly promoted to it from the lower grade or unit and to adapt its work to fit the needs of these pupils.

⁴Caswell, op. cit., p. 89.

⁵National Education Association, Five Unifying Factors in American Education, Ninth Yearbook of the Department of Superintendence of the National Education Association (Washington, D.C.: 1931), pp. 18-22.

F. Promotion procedures demand continuous analysis and study of cumulative pupil case-history records in order that refinement of procedure may result and guesswork and conjecture be reduced to a minimum.⁶

The Committee pointed out that promotion cannot be settled on the basis of one of the above principles alone, but they must be taken as a whole and each case decided on the consideration of all of them.

Plan for eliminating grades. Otto⁷ suggests another plan for the promotion of pupils. He states that the question of promotion is one of the most important in elementary school organization, but there is a preponderance of evidence to show an absence of well formulated policies regarding it. He further states that the plans that have been suggested for remedying the situation all have serious shortcomings. The plan he suggests, he says, has no earmarks of practical application or scientific evaluation.

His plan is based on the idea that since children should be classified on the basis of social maturity, it is essential that all children be promoted regularly and periodically. Except for unusual cases or unusual circumstances the policy calls for one hundred per cent promotion through-

⁶Henry J. Otto, Elementary School Organization and Administration (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1934), p. 253.

⁷Ibid., pp. 256-57.

out the elementary school. It further recommends that the term "school grade" be abandoned and that children be designated as spending their "first year," "second year," or some other year in the elementary school. Progress would be regular and continuous and children would be placed in the groups in which they could achieve the most. The secondary school would have to modify its program so that it would provide for all the children that would come to it from the elementary school. School marks would be eliminated and in their place ratings of "satisfactory" or "unsatisfactory" would be substituted.

Steps to take to eliminate failure. Elsbree⁸ makes a number of suggestions that may be used by teachers who accept the desirability of normal progress and who subscribe to the underlying philosophy of the modern theory. A discussion of the suggestions of Elsbree follow:

1. Begin by studying the fundamental causes of non-promotion at all levels of the school system. It is not enough to know that reading is the chief cause of failure in the first grade and arithmetic in later grades, but teachers must understand the problems that children have and what the school is doing to overcome these problems. Teachers in the upper grades and the secondary school must

⁸Elsbree, op. cit., pp. 25-30.

be sympathetic with the point of view implied in normal progress, or the program will not work. It would be helpful if they would subscribe to the following statement by Mort:

The standard percentage of failure should be zero, and every teacher should feel called upon to explain, in terms of the failure of the school in placing the individual, the failure of the pupil to do his best, or in terms of his own instruction the cause of the failure of any pupil. If it is the school's fault in placement, the course of the pupil should be altered. If it is the pupil's fault, he should become a case for careful clinical investigation. If it is the teacher's fault, he should take steps to improve his instruction, or to find work where his failures will be of less consequence to others.⁹

2. Make case studies of all pupils who failed the preceding semester or year and list the preventatives that might have been successfully applied. In many cases the reason is administrative, such as class size too large or improper and insufficient materials. Poor health, poor home conditions, and a variety of other factors may be the cause. A knowledge of all these reasons will be helpful in aiding the individual. If every teacher would prepare a written statement concerning each pupil failed and would specify what, in her judgment, was the cause or causes of the failure and the steps that had been taken to prevent it as well as what additional steps might have been taken, the amount of non-promotion would be reduced.

⁹Mort, op. cit., p. 182.

3. Become thoroughly acquainted with pupils in the class early in the school year. A good set of records is essential as well as a desire on the part of the teacher to find out all available facts about each child. A teacher might profitably acquire early in the school term such information as the following:

1. Number of brothers and sisters, if any, each pupil has.

2. The relative age of pupil with reference to his brothers and sisters; i.e. whether this child is the youngest or the oldest among several children.

3. Whether or not there is a new baby in the home of any pupil, and, if so, the state of mind of the pupil regarding the new baby.

4. Kind of relations which exist in the home between father and mother, between parents and child.

5. Economic background of each pupil.

6. Health history of pupil and present physical condition.

7. Knowledge of excessively shy or over-aggressive children in class and reasons for such behavior.

8. Knowledge of the special talents of pupils as well as the academic achievement levels they attained in subjects in which standardized tests are available.

9. Knowledge concerning the emotional stability of pupils.

10. Firsthand information as to pupils' play interests and physical skills.

11. Preferences of pupils as to friends.¹⁰

¹⁰Elsbree, op. cit., pp. 28, 29.

4. As the school year progresses, analyze noticeable inadequacies in the achievement of individual pupils. It is necessary for the teachers to appraise the efforts of all children continuously and to help those who are having trouble. It is not enough to suggest that the student having trouble must work harder but specific suggestions must be made that will help. Perhaps a change in the material being presented or a change in the teaching methods for that particular pupil will be in order. A good command of the principles of mental hygiene will also aid teachers in dealing with pupils who are having trouble in achievement.

Many schools have drawn up promotional plans along the modern idea of pupil promotion, and many writers have suggested plans that will aid in the solution of the problem. Philadelphia operates under the following guide points:

1. There is no set percentage failed or passed; the individual is the only consideration.
2. The responsibility for deciding whether a student fails or passes rests with the individual teacher.
3. A pupil out of age range is placed in a remedial class.
4. The placement of pupils is at the discretion of school authorities with pupil and parental understanding.
5. Each student is to be equipped with the minimum essentials; there is no substitute for honest effort.¹²

¹²"Educational News and Editorial Comment,"
Elementary School Journal, 48:531-2, June, 1948.

The policy in New York city is not one of one hundred per cent promotions but one of keeping the student with his own social group.¹³

LeBaron avers that a new definition of a grade is needed, and he suggests that a grade must be defined in terms of the children who are grouped together and the kind of program developed with them. He gives as his definition, "A grade in a modern elementary school could be defined as a group of children under one teacher who seem to work together as a unit."¹⁴

Kubik believes that children should be grouped on the basis of chronological age and social maturity. There should be no promotions and no failures but regrouping when necessary.¹⁵ Jones suggests that grouping must be flexible and must meet the varied needs of pupils. Grouping may be changed at any time that it appears to be needed and not just at the end of the school term.¹⁶ Every states that a

¹³W. C. Bagley, "New York City Public Schools Ease 'Promotion' on 'Social Maturity'," School and Society, 60: 67-68, July 29, 1944.

¹⁴Walter A. LeBaron, "What Basis for Pupil Promotion," The Nation's Schools, 35:51, June, 1945.

¹⁵Edmond J. Kubik and J. E. Pease, "A Promotion and Grouping Policy for the Elementary School," American School Board Journal, 116:38, February, 1948.

¹⁶Daisy Marvel Jones, "How Shall Children be Grouped and Promoted?" Childhood Education, 24:234, January 1948.

good question to ask when it becomes necessary to decide whether or not an individual pupil shall pass is: "Is it going to be better for that boy or girl to repeat, or is it better to let that youngster go on even though he has not reached the standard set."¹⁷

¹⁷James Newell Emery, "Promotions," Journal of Education, 132:117-18, April, 1949.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions. The purpose of this study was to find out the facts concerning pupil promotion and non-promotion in the elementary school and to make recommendations to public schools which might enable pupils to progress through school in a more orderly manner. The procedure has been to explore the available literature and to study the results of the research concerning the problem, and to organize this material into a form that will best answer the questions that occur concerning pupil promotion and non-promotion.

As a result of this study the following conclusions can be drawn concerning pupil promotion:

1. A policy of non-promotion of pupils is not justified. Research shows that there is very little value to the individual pupil in repeating a grade. There are exceptions, however, and these are important.

2. A policy of high standards that all pupils must maintain is not justified and will serve as a detriment to the individual pupil. Standards should have a definite relationship to the abilities of the individual students.

3. A policy of non-promotion is not beneficial to the student or to the school. It can be detrimental to the students personality and cause disciplinary problems and

unnecessary expense to the school.

Recommendations. In light of the findings the following recommendations are made:

1. Before an individual is required to repeat a grade a thorough study of his case should be made by his teacher, principal, and the special service personnel that are available. The following points should be considered: his school achievement, home background, physical and mental health, maturity, and social adaptability. After the study, which should be started as soon as it becomes evident that the student is having difficulty in his school work, a meeting or series of meetings should be arranged with the following people present; the principal, teacher, parent, and in some cases, the student.
2. Teachers should become well acquainted with their students early in the term and a good set of records should be kept for each student.
3. The curriculum should be adjusted and enriched so that each student will achieve to the maximum of his ability. It should take care of both slow and fast students.
4. The goal of the elementary school should be the continuous progress of each child.
5. An individual should not be required to repeat a grade unless there is evidence that this experience will definitely be more valuable and rewarding than continuing

with his present classmates.

6. A statement of the school's promotion policy should be in a handbook available to teachers and parents.

Principles of a promotion policy. The author believes, after completing the study, that the following principles are important in formulating a policy of promotion for the elementary school. They should not be presented to the teaching staff or committee studying promotion but they can best serve as guides for the principal or other person leading such a group.

1. The committee should have representatives of all interested persons and agencies such as community organizations, parents, teachers, the school principal, and special service personnel on the staff.

2. The present promotion policy and its effect on the students should be studied and evaluated.

3. The school's philosophy should be stated.

4. The committee should decide the procedure to be followed in promoting pupils.

5. The committee should decide what factors are to be considered in promoting pupils.

6. The committee should decide what reasons, deficiencies, or causes shall result in the failure of a student.

7. The committee should decide the procedure to be

followed in failing students. This should include what study is to be made, who is to make the study, and who is to decide whether or not a student is to be failed.

8. The procedure for notifying students and parents should be stated.

9. The committee's report should be stated in such a way that it is a complete statement of the promotion and non-promotion policy of the school, and, as such, can be presented to teachers and parents.

10. Provision should be made for continuous appraisal of the policy.

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